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SUBJECT: BOUTEFLIKA'S ARMY: CIVILIAN CONTROL AT WHAT PRICE?

REF: A. 08 ALGIERS 1307

[1](#)B. 08 ALGIERS 1121

[1](#)C. 08 ALGIERS 1220

[1](#)D. 08 ALGIERS 1208

Classified By: Ambassador David D. Pearce; reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (S) SUMMARY: Since President Abdelaziz Bouteflika famously announced his intention to be "more than three-quarters of a president" following his election in 1999, he has struggled to assert greater control over Algeria's army to avoid becoming yet another leader designated and replaced at will by Algeria's generals. Those familiar with the regime say he has since succeeded to a significant degree in weakening the grip of the Directorate for Intelligence and Security (DRS, the military intelligence service) over the army by systematically replacing generals and regional commanders with loyalists, many of whom hail from Bouteflika's native Tlemcen region. Critics tell us that while Bouteflika has ostensibly asserted greater civilian control over the military, he has also "broken" the army by placing loyalty over competence in his tug of war with the DRS. While today's army no longer takes to the streets to quell violent social protests and Algeria's Interior Ministry is hiring thousands of new police officers, one opposition leader sums up the result as "a transition from a military state to a police state" rather than a democratic opening. The result is a leadership structure, or "Pouvoir," that now consists not of a single center of power but of several, such that decision-making has become an inefficient process of negotiation and argument rarely exposed to public view. END SUMMARY.

ALGERIA'S PARALLEL SOCIETY

[1](#)2. (S) Former Prime Minister Sid Ahmed Ghozali explained to the Ambassador on December 31 that there are two parallel societies in Algeria, one on the surface and another behind the scenes. Ghozali was joined by former DRS officer Chefik Mesbah, who explained that while a complex system of political variables was not unique to the Algerian system, the difference was that the Algerian system was invisible while in the U.S., in contrast, the variables at play were visible. Algeria's parallel societies did not intersect, creating two almost entirely self-referential worlds. Mesbah explained that the split mirrored the distance between the heavily Islamist street and an older, French-educated ruling class. Where is the current leader, he wondered, who can visit the crowded working-class Algiers neighborhoods of Boubsila or El Harrach? The Algeria of Boubsila, Mesbah said, is not Bouteflika's Algeria.

TRUST NOTHING OFFICIAL

13. (S) Prominent human rights lawyer Ali Yahia Abdenour, president emeritus of the Algerian League for the Defense of Human Rights (LADDH), also described the current political leadership as divided between the "apparent power" led by Bouteflika and the "hidden power" most often personified by General Mohamed "Toufik" Mediene, head of the DRS. According to Abdenour, an ongoing tension between these two centers of power has focused on control of the army, with Bouteflika's age and declining health causing interested factions within the Pouvoir to jockey for position just as they did when then-President Houari Boumediene lay in a coma in 1978. Ghazali said that because of Bouteflika's efforts to exert greater influence over the army, these hidden rivalries had splintered the Pouvoir into several different centers of power, with the result that decisionmaking has become a painful process of negotiation and consensus-building. Because all of the relevant discussions are hidden from public view, Ghazali cautioned, the public discourse of the media and official government statements should be taken with a grain of salt: "Trust nothing official," he said.

A BROKEN ARMY?

14. (S) Long-time National Liberation Front (FLN) insider Abdelkader Bounekraf resigned his post on the FLN central committee in the beginning of 2008, lamenting the FLN was not the same one he fought for beginning in 1954. Bounekraf remains a visible figure and known critic of FLN Secretary General Abdelaziz Belkhadem, whom he blames for Islamizing

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the FLN and weakening its appeal as a cherished symbol of the Algerian state. At the same time, Bounekraf told us recently, the other primary symbol of the state -- the army -- had also changed. He said that Bouteflika had "broken" the army by gradually replacing older generals with a newer, less experienced cadre of officers who were loyal to Bouteflika but not as competent as the generals they replaced. Behind the scenes of the public promotion of a class of colonels to the rank of general in June 2008 lay much resentment from older colonels and generals who felt more qualified and experienced. A disproportionate number of the new generals hail from Bouteflika's native western province of Tlemcen, further weakening the traditional army power base in eastern Algeria. In Bounekraf's view, Bouteflika had compromised the army's role as guarantor of the stability and survival of the Algerian state, and had done so primarily as an effort to solidify his position as president.

15. (S) Mesbah reinforced Bounekraf's view, saying that he had visited retired General Khaled Nezzar (ref A) shortly before the holidays to convey his greetings. In attendance were several of the newer, younger generals whom Bouteflika had promoted in June of 2008. Mesbah said that Nezzar acknowledged that times had changed, telling the generals "the days of coups d'etat are over" in Algeria, and it was now time to exert influence in other ways. Ghazali explained to the Ambassador that the Algerian system was one that "designated" its leaders, citing the process by which he had been named -- "tapped by the generals" -- to become prime minister in June 1991. Today the Algerian system still designated its officials, he said, with lists even of customs officials reviewed by influential business leaders connected to Bouteflika. Because Bouteflika had succeeded in disconnecting the DRS from the army more than ever before, however, Ghazali said the designation process was now slower, marked by hidden negotiation and compromise between several different centers of power.

AN ATOMIZED, INCOMPETENT SYSTEM

16. (S) The "system" that Ghazali referred to was also

described to the Ambassador recently by another former prime minister, Ahmed Benbitour, as one of weak institutions that suffered from a profound lack of competence and vision. Benbitour explained that this lack of competence was due to a variety of factors, most notably the brain drain that resulted from the terrorism of the 1990s and an education system whose quality had dropped off dramatically since the early 1980s. Ghazali said that after the education of the generation born in the 1950s (including Prime Minister Ahmed Ouyahia and Algerian Ambassador to the U.S. Abdallah Baali), institutions such as the Ecole Nationale d'Administration closed or changed focus, creating a steep drop-off in education quality. Mesbah added that the shortcomings of Algeria's arabization campaign (ref B) had further weakened Algeria's institutions, and that the general nature of the system itself was one of co-opting and eliminating those who stand out or rock the boat. The system, he added, is not built to produce change, and "cannot produce an Obama."

17. (S) Mesbah asserted that decisions such as granting legal status to a political party or civil society organization -- or tapping individuals for leadership positions -- were not always carefully calculated. Incompetence within the ranks of the Pouvoir was extreme. While it was easy from the outside to assign greater meaning to such decisions, Mesbah said many decisions came to pass simply because the people making them did not know what to do and thus chose to do nothing and let inertia take its course. On the other hand, Ghazali said, the decision to do nothing could be quite deliberate. He cited his own effort to form a political party in advance of the 1999 presidential election. His would-be party never received legal approval from the interior ministry, and was thus prevented from opening bank accounts and holding meetings. "You will never see a paper trail here," Ghazali told the Ambassador, "You just get silence, not even a receipt that you filed your request."

BOUTEFLIKA BETS ON ZERHOUNI AND THE ZAOUIAS

18. (S) Within the context of Bouteflika's tug of war with Mediene and the DRS for control of the army, opposition leader Said Sadi of the Rally for Culture and Democracy (RCD)

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explained on November 4 that Bouteflika was aware of the need to maintain law and order and relied heavily on Interior Minister Yazid Zerhouni to do so. Zerhouni and Algerian national police chief Ali Tounsi spoke publicly on several occasions in 2008 of their ambitious plan to expand the national police force to 200,000 by 2010. In January of 2008, the police force consisted of 117,243 officers, with an estimated 15,000 new trainees recruited in 2008. Zerhouni announced at a May 2008 conference in Nouakchott of western Mediterranean interior ministers that the 2006-2010 campaign to strengthen the national police and gendarmerie, including equipment, higher salaries and training, was expected to cost four billion euros. Sadi said that Bouteflika trusts Zerhouni far more than he trusts Mediene, but that given Bouteflika's "three-quarters of a president" comment, outsiders should not mistake the expansion of the civilian police force as a democratic opening. Bouteflika, Sadi said, had no intention of losing control, making his strategy simply "a transition from military state to police state."

19. (S) Bouteflika's other vehicle for exercising control has been to use the Sufi religious schools -- the zaouias -- for political mobilization and to counter the more extreme brand of Salafism creeping into Algerian society (ref C). Abdenour, the aging denizen of Algeria's human rights scene, told us that Bouteflika needed the zaouias not only as a political tool but also to boost his credibility with the Islamist electorate, which "was significant." Abdenour said that Bouteflika had "become a mystic" and his age and illness had driven him to turn to religion as a way of atoning for youthful indiscretions. The zaouias also provided Bouteflika

with an additional base of support among Islamists, in the face of competition from the DRS and an army whose loyalty he has never fully taken for granted. If there is one thing the DRS and army do not like, Abdenour explained, it is the Islamists, after fighting them so bitterly during the 1990s.

COMMENT

¶10. (S) While Bouteflika's efforts to solidify his position by exerting greater control over the army appear to have succeeded to a degree in prying control of the army away from the DRS, the result appears to be a decentralized, splintered Pouvoir with reduced decisionmaking capacity. Our contacts, all of whom have personal knowledge of the actors involved, believe this has ominous implications for the long-term stability of the regime, given their lack of faith in the ability of the police to fill a void left by a weakened army.

The DRS has shown signs of seeking to reassert its control over the army, but since Bouteflika wields the power to appoint and remove generals, the DRS's primary lever appears to be the process of designating a Bouteflika successor. Meanwhile, Ghazali said that the speed and debate-free manner in which the constitution was revised in November (ref D) made it clear that the system was preparing to hold true to its history of designating leaders. Whether that leader was ultimately Bouteflika or not, Ghazali and Mesbah said that the process would be hidden as it had always been in the past -- only this time, the process would be less efficient and involve more negotiations and compromises behind the scenes. Mesbah concluded that the rival power centers within Algeria's hidden parallel society mirrored the institutional atomization of the Algerian political system writ large: a series of largely incompetent institutions left spinning their wheels independently of one another, with nothing to connect the dots.

PEARCE